

# B

## BACK TO SQUARE ONE, GO

return to the beginning

1. The editor didn't like the article I wrote for the newspaper. She told me to redo it, so I guess I'll have to *go back to square one*.
2. The builders constructed a building that didn't meet the city's requirements. Now they'll have to tear it down and begin building again. They're *back to square one*.

Synonyms: *start from scratch*

Compare to: *back to the drawing board*

Whereas *back to the drawing board* is used for the idea of re-planning or redesigning, *back to square one* can apply to starting any activity over. The expression originates from the idea of a game board on which square one is the square where the game begins.

## BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD, GO

return to the planning stage of a project

1. Our plan to raise money for a new swimming pool didn't work. Now we're *back to the drawing board* and trying to think of a better plan.
2. The idea of buying computers for the public schools through the lottery failed. The city leaders had to *go back to the drawing board* to think of another way to come up with the money.

Compare to: *back to square one*

The expression originates from the idea that plans and designs are developed on a drawing board.

## BACK TO THE WALL, HAVE (ONE'S)

to be in a difficult or desperate situation

1. Gary lost his job over a month ago and he has spent all his savings paying his bills. Now he doesn't have any more money, and his *back is to the wall*.
2. My *back was to the wall*. It seemed like my only choices were to try to save the company with my personal savings or pull out and let the company go while I still had some money left.

Compare to: *in a bind*; *in a fix*; *in a jam*; *behind the eight ball*

## BACKHANDED COMPLIMENT

a criticism that is phrased in such a way that it appears to be a compliment

1. Patricia said she can't wear fake gold jewelry the way I can because it turns her skin green, and I think she was giving me a *backhanded compliment*. She was really letting everyone know that she wears real gold jewelry while the jewelry I have on is fake.

2. Paul is not a very nice person. He is always giving people *backhanded compliments* that sound like he is being nice when he is really just insulting them.

Compare to: *damn with faint praise*

The term *backhanded* combines the meaning of *back* meaning insincere or malicious and *hand* meaning to give.

## BACK-SEAT DRIVER

a person who gives driving orders when he/she is not the driver

1. Why must you tell me every time you see a red light ahead? I'm the one who is driving. Stop being a *back-seat driver*.
2. Andy's mother always made him nervous when he drove her to the store. She would tell him where to turn, how fast to drive, and where to park. She was a *back-seat driver*.

When cars were first developed in the 1920s, wealthy car owners would often ride in the back seats, telling their drivers where to go, where to turn, etc. Now such a practice by anyone is seen as intrusive and rude.

## BAD BLOOD

negative or ill feelings

1. The young man and woman knew their parents would not approve of their marriage because there was *bad blood* between the families.
2. Those two brothers will never get along. There is too much *bad blood* between them.

## BARK UP THE WRONG TREE

to misdirect one's efforts or argument

1. If Frank is trying to get a pay raise from the assistant manager, he's *barking up the wrong tree*. Only the manager can authorize a pay increase.
2. Janice is angry at me because she thinks I took her books, but she's *barking up the wrong tree*. I had nothing to do with it.

This expression stems from the 19th century American frontier practice of hunting raccoons using hunting dogs. When the raccoon attempted to escape up a tree, the dog was supposed to remain at the foot of the tree barking until the hunter arrived. However, if the dog went to the wrong tree, especially at night, or the raccoon jumped to the branches of another tree, the hunter would end up focusing on the wrong tree.

## BATS IN (ONE'S) BELFRY, HAVE

harmlessly crazy or eccentric

1. You must have *bats in your belfry* if you think your parents will let you see that movie.
2. Don't listen to her. She doesn't know what she's talking about. She has *bats in her belfry*.

Synonym: *have a screw loose*, *out to lunch*, *off one's rocker*

A belfry is the tower of a church where the bell hangs, and is analogous to one's head. If a person has room for bats in his head, his head is full of space rather than brains.

## BEAT A DEAD HORSE

to argue or pursue a point or topic without the possibility of success

1. They should give up trying to argue with the boss on that subject. They're *beating a dead horse*.
2. The boy kept asking for a motorcycle, but his mother told him he could not have one and she would not change her mind. She told him he was *beating a dead horse*.

Synonyms: *run (something) into the ground*

The expression is usually used to describe verbal communication.

## BEAT A HASTY RETREAT

to run very fast in the opposite direction

1. The old man came out on the porch to chase away the small boys who were throwing rocks at his windows. When they saw him, they *beat a hasty retreat*.
2. The cat wandered into the neighbor's yard, but it *beat a hasty retreat* when it saw the dog.

Synonym: *make tracks*

## BEAT ABOUT/AROUND THE BUSH

to speak or write evasively; to talk around an issue

1. Judy couldn't come right out and tell her fiancé that she no longer wanted to marry him. She had to *beat around the bush* until he understood.
2. If you disagree with my opinion, just tell me. Don't *beat around the bush*.

Antonym: *get to the point*

Synonyms: *stonewall; hem and haw*

The phrase originates from a hunting practice dating to the 15th century, in which hunters hired 'beaters' to drive small animals out of bushes where the hunters could more easily get to them. The beaters would lightly beat around the edges of the bushes to lure the animals out without completely frightening them away.

## BEAT (SOMEONE) TO THE PUNCH

to do something before someone else does it

1. They decided to make an offer to buy the house, but when they did, they found that someone else had already bought it. Someone *beat them to the punch*.
2. Linda was going to invite him out to lunch but he *beat her to the punch*. He invited her before she had a chance to ask him.

## BEAT THE BUSHES

to search exhaustively

1. We'll have to *beat the bushes* if we want to find another editor as good as Arthur was.
2. I've *beat the bushes* trying to find the right spare part for my old car, but I haven't found it yet.

Compare to: *leave no stone unturned*

## BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL

in a difficult situation or position

1. Barbara's parents have told her to study medicine but she really wants to study law. How is she going to explain this to them? She's *behind the eight ball*.
2. My wife wants me to hire my brother-in-law to work in my company, but I don't want to because he's very lazy. I'm *behind the eight ball* on this one.

Synonyms: *back to the wall; in a bind/fix/jam; between the devil and the deep blue sea; between a rock and a hard place*

The expression comes from the game of billiards, or pool, in which the eight ball is always pocketed last. If one accidentally sinks the eight ball before the others, one automatically loses the game. Trying to hit another ball that is too close to the eight ball is seen as a risky situation.

## BELOW THE BELT, HIT (SOMEONE)

to act unfairly

1. John told Robert about the job he was planning to apply for and Robert went out and got it himself! Robert doesn't play fair. He *hits below the belt*.
2. Mary introduced Sally to her boyfriend, Mike, and before she knew it, Sally and Mike were dating. That was *below the belt*.

The expression originates from the sport of boxing, in which it is against the rules to hit one's opponent below his or her belt.

## BEND (SOMEONE'S) EAR

to talk to someone for a long time

1. I dread it every time that woman calls me on the telephone because she *bends my ear* about how her children don't appreciate her.
2. Don't mention politics to Bill. He loves talking about politics and he'll *bend your ear* about it for hours.

The expression usually has a negative connotation.

## BESIDE (ONESELF)

distracted; very anxious and troubled

1. When the mother couldn't find her young son in the crowd, she was *beside herself* with worry.
2. I was *beside myself* when I realized the fire had destroyed my house.

## BESIDE THE POINT

irrelevant

1. Your excuse for not giving me your homework on Monday is *beside the point*. It was due the Friday before.
2. Her argument that she needed a new dress for the dance was *beside the point*. We simply couldn't afford one.
3. The judge decided that the lawyer's argument was *beside the point*, and told the jury to disregard it.

This idiom stems from the idea of being separate from, or not part of, the main idea (the point).

## BET (ONE'S) BOOTS

to be sure

1. Paula's never late. If she said she would be here at 9:00, you can *bet your boots* she will be.
2. I'll *bet my boots* that the salesman will try to get us to buy a more expensive car. They always do.

Synonym: *bet (one's) bottom dollar*

Whereas *bet one's bottom dollar* can be used in both the affirmative and negative, *bet one's boots* is used only in the affirmative.

## BET (ONE'S) BOTTOM DOLLAR

to be sure

1. I know you think you're going to get that job, but don't *bet your bottom dollar* on it.
2. I'm sure they'll be married before the end of the year. I'd *bet my bottom dollar* on it.

Synonym: *bet (one's) boots*

Whereas *bet one's boots* is used only in the affirmative, *bet one's bottom dollar* can be used in both the affirmative and the negative.

## BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

facing two difficult outcomes for the same situation

1. Ralph found out that his brother cheated on an exam, and he knows he should tell the teacher, but he is hesitating because it's his brother. He's caught *between a rock and a hard place*.
2. The doctor told his patient that he had a very contagious disease and that it was important to tell his family. When the man refused, the doctor didn't know whether he should call his patient's family and tell them. He was *between a rock and a hard place*.

Synonym: *between the devil and the deep blue sea*

Compare to: *in a bind/fix/jam; over a barrel; behind the eight ball*

*Between a rock and a hard place* is more dramatic than *in a bind* and would be used when the problem of choice has no apparent or easy solution.

## BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

facing two difficult outcomes for the same situation

1. I consider both Paul and Mitch to be friends of mine. Now they are mad at each other and each wants me to take his side against the other. No matter what I do I could lose one friend or both. I'm *between the devil and the deep blue sea*.
2. Dana's really *between the devil and the deep blue sea*. The boss wants her to lie about the financial state of the company. If she does, it would be unethical, but if she doesn't, the boss might find a way to fire her.

Synonym: *between a rock and a hard place*

## BEYOND THE PALE

beyond or outside the limits of morally or socially acceptable behavior

1. That remark Jerry made wasn't simply in poor taste. It was *beyond the pale*.
2. Ron received an invitation to dinner and didn't have the decency to let his hosts know he wouldn't be able to attend. I think that kind of behavior is *beyond the pale*.

The word *pale* in this expression should not be confused with the adjective meaning "colorless." Here, *pale* means a region surrounded by a paling or fence and ruled by a governing body. In British history, the pale was the area in and around Dublin, Ireland, which was colonized and ruled by the English. Beyond the pale was anything outside this area. To the English, this was synonymous with being outside law and order, i.e. outside civilization.

## BIG CHEESE

an important, powerful or influential person

1. You can tell he's the *big cheese* in this city because everyone listens to what he says – even the mayor.
2. She must really think she's a *big cheese*. She speaks to her co-workers as if they were her servants.

Synonyms: *bigwig; big shot; big wheel; head honcho*

## BIG FISH IN A SMALL POND

a person who is considered important primarily because the place or setting is small

1. I accepted a teaching position in a small village overseas because I will have responsibilities that I wouldn't be able to get for years in a big city. I like the idea of being a *big fish in a small pond*.
2. Diane was a *big fish in a small pond* in her hometown, but when she moved to New York City, nobody knew who she was.

## BIG SHOT

an important, powerful, or influential person

1. The company's *big shots* are getting free trips to Hawaii this year.
2. Now that you've been made a vice-president, you're really a *big shot*, aren't you?

Synonyms: *big wheel; bigwig; big cheese; head honcho, heavyweight*

The expression *big shot* is often used sarcastically or disparagingly.

## BIG WHEEL

an important, powerful, or influential person

1. All the *big wheels* get the use of company cars and parking spaces right next to the door of the building.
2. Janet says she doesn't want to become a *big wheel* in the company because she doesn't want so much responsibility.

Synonyms: *bigwig*; *big shot*; *big cheese*; *head honcho*, *heavyweight*

## BIGWIG

an important, powerful or influential person

1. Fred likes to think he's a *bigwig* but he really doesn't have much power outside his own department.
2. Did you see all the expensive cars in the parking lot outside? There must be a meeting of company *bigwigs* today.

Synonyms: *big wheel*; *big shot*; *big cheese*; *head honcho*

Compare to: *heavyweight*

The expression *bigwig* is usually applied to a person high up in a corporate structure.

## BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

a broad view or overview of something or someplace

1. This outline will give you a *bird's-eye view* of my new book.
2. The flight attendant said if we sit on the right side of the airplane, we'd get a *bird's-eye view* of the Grand Canyon.

The expression suggests the view that a bird gets when it flies overhead.

## BITE OFF MORE THAN (ONE) CAN CHEW

to take on more work or responsibility than one can accomplish

1. Sue plans to oversee the construction of her new house at the same time that she has taken on a lot of volunteer work at her son's school. I think she has *bitten off more than she can chew*.
2. They can't keep up with the number of classes they're taking at the university. They *bit off more than they can chew*.

## BITE THE BULLET

to face a difficult or unpleasant situation

1. With our credit cards, we've been spending more money than we have. We're going to have to *bite the bullet* and figure out a way to pay for everything we've charged.
2. The doctor says you're going to have to change your life style unless you want to become very sick. It's time to *bite the bullet*, take a look at what you're doing to yourself, and change before it's too late.

Compare to: *face the music*; *grin and bear it*; *take the bull by the horns*

Whereas *face the music* focuses more on accepting responsibility for some misdeed, *bite the bullet* and *grin and bear it* focus more on preparing oneself to accept something painful or difficult. The expression originates from the practice where, before the days of anesthesia, a person undergoing an operation might have been told to bite down on a bullet to distract from the pain.

## BITE THE DUST

to be destroyed or ruined beyond repair; slang for "to die"

1. The boss didn't like my proposal and he wants me to start over. Another good idea *bites the dust*.
2. I think this lamp just *bit the dust*. It broke and I know it's not worth fixing.

## BITTER/HARD PILL TO SWALLOW

a difficult or unpleasant reality to deal with

1. John discovered the hard truth about responsibility. He didn't get his college application in on time and the school won't reconsider. It was a *hard pill to swallow*, but he had to learn the hard way.
2. Jill thought she was a good singer. When her brother told her she was tone-deaf, it was a *bitter pill to swallow*.

The expression suggests something that, like a pill, is unpleasant but cannot be avoided.

## BLACK AND BLUE

discolored from a bruise; injured in a fight either physically or verbally

1. The girl fell out of the tree but didn't break any bones. She just had a *black and blue* knee.
2. James came out of the meeting *black and blue*, since he had made so many mistakes preparing the report without consulting his boss.

## BLACK MARKET

a system of buying and selling illegal goods or goods at illegal prices or quantities

1. During the war each household was allotted a small amount of sugar and butter each month. If you wanted more, you had to buy it on the *black market*.
2. There is a growing *black market* for consumer goods that are difficult or impossible to find here.

## BLACK OUT

to lose consciousness temporarily

1. After my operation, the doctor told me not to drive for a few months because I might *black out* and have an accident.
2. Tom was walking down the street in the hot sun. He became dizzy and then *blacked out*.

A *blackout* means a period of unconsciousness. The expression is also used when the electricity goes out in a city. As a noun, *blackout* is one word.

## BLACK SHEEP

an outcast

1. I haven't seen my uncle since I was a child, because he isn't in contact with my parents. He's the *black sheep* of the family.
2. All the girls in that family except Mary grew up to become respected members of the community. She was the *black sheep* of the family.

The expression probably originates from the fact that most sheep are white and only the very different ones are black.

## BLACK TIE

formal dress in which men wear black bow ties and dinner jackets or tuxedos and women wear formal, usually floor-length dresses

1. The dinner was *black-tie*, so all the men wore black bow ties and dinner jackets.
2. The film star's wedding was *black-tie*. It was a glamorous affair that I'll never forget.

The expression originates from the black bow tie that is part of men's formal dress.

## BLOW (ONE'S) OWN HORN

to boast or brag

1. Keith lets everyone know that the boss is going to make him the new assistant manager. He likes to *blow his own horn*.
2. Ruth won't make many friends if she keeps *blowing her own horn* about her accomplishments.

Dating back to at least the 16th century, this phrase is a reference to the practice of blowing horns to announce the arrival of important officials such as kings. To *blow one's own horn* is to boast or claim a position of superiority over others.

## BLOW (ONE'S) STACK

to become suddenly very angry

1. When Emily's father saw the damage she had done to the family car, he *blew his stack*.
2. I hope the boss doesn't *blow his stack* when he finds out I didn't finish this work on time.

Compare to: *raise Cain*; *fly off the handle*; *get (one's) dander up*; *blow off steam*

## BLOW/RUN HOT AND COLD

to have mixed or inconsistent feelings about something

1. I don't understand Jack. One day he's really nice to me, and the next day he couldn't care less. He *blows hot and cold*.
2. Pam *blows hot and cold* about studying nursing. Sometimes she says she would enjoy it and sometimes she says it would be too much work.

## BLOW OFF STEAM

to express one's anger, usually noisily and harmlessly, thereby relieving one's tension

1. Forgive me for yelling at you. I guess I just had to *blow off some steam*.
2. When my mother needs to *blow off steam*, she slams the cupboard doors.

Synonyms: *blow (one's) stack*; *fly off the handle*

The expression suggests the noise created when a steam boiler releases excess pressure.

## BLUE

sad

1. Rachel seems pretty unhappy these days. I wonder why she's feeling *blue*.
2. Let's try to cheer up the children. They've been pretty *blue* since their pet dog died.

Synonyms: *down in the dumps*; *down in the mouth*

## BLUE-BLOOD

a person (or animal) that is an aristocrat or from a noble family

1. The young man's parents did not want him to marry the woman he had chosen because they considered themselves *blue-bloods* and thought their son was too good for her.
2. The racehorses raised on my father's horse farm are *blue-bloods*—they come from a long line of Kentucky Derby winners.

## BLUE LAW

a law which regulates personal behavior such as going to certain movies, dancing, or gambling

1. In the United States in 1920, a *blue law* was passed prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages. It was later repealed.
2. Some cities have *blue laws* that limit or prohibit such activities as dancing and gambling.

## BLUE RIBBON

renowned (sentence 1); first prize (sentence 2)

1. The president assembled a *blue ribbon* panel of experts to study the problem.
2. Sally's science project won the *blue ribbon* because it was the best in the contest.

The expression originates from the blue ribbon that is often presented to the best entry in a contest.

## BLUE-COLLAR WORKER

a person who earns a living doing manual labor, or generally uses his or her body rather than his or her mind to earn a living

1. Sam works on an assembly line mass-producing clock radios. He's a *blue-collar worker*.
2. People who work in factories doing heavy labor are usually *blue-collar workers*.

Antonym: *white-collar worker*

The expression originates from the color of the shirt generally worn by factory workers while on the job.

## BOILING POINT

the point at which one loses one's temper

1. You've just about pushed me to the *boiling point*. In a minute I'm going to lose my temper.
2. Don't push the boss too hard about taking time off work. She hasn't had much patience this week and it wouldn't take much to reach her *boiling point*.

Compare to: *make (one's) blood boil*

The expression suggests heated water whose surface erupts with bubbles when it reaches a particular temperature.

## BOMB

to fail completely

1. The playwright's new play closed on the first night. It *bombed*.
2. They thought they had hired an exciting speaker but instead he really *bombed*.

Compare to: *lay an egg*

Whereas *bomb* is usually applied to creative activities (e.g., a play, a book, a movie, an idea) that fail on a grand scale, *lay an egg* is usually applied to doing something that is socially embarrassing on a smaller scale.

## BONE OF CONTENTION, A

a topic of dispute

1. The subject of politics is a *bone of contention* between Sandra and me—we never seem to agree.
2. John wants to send the children to a private school, and I think it's unnecessary. It's a *bone of contention* between us.

Compare to: *bone to pick, a*

The expression suggests a bone thrown between two dogs that would naturally fight over it.

## BONE TO PICK, A

a dispute

1. I have a *bone to pick* with Anne. She told the boss I was looking for a new job and now he's angry at me.
2. You could tell by the angry look on their faces and the way they walked in looking for Jane that they had a *bone to pick* with her.

Compare to: *bone of contention*

## BORN YESTERDAY

naïve

1. Do you really think you can fool me? I'm not that dumb. I wasn't *born yesterday*, you know.
2. Philip is going to get hurt if he goes on trusting everyone the way he does. He never suspects that people make friends with him just because he is rich. He acts like he was *born yesterday*.

Compare to: *wet behind the ears*

The expression suggests that someone who was born yesterday has not learned to distrust or be suspicious of people and is therefore naïve. *Wet behind the ears* suggests inexperience, while *born yesterday* suggests that the person is easily fooled.

## BOTH FEET ON THE GROUND

(to be) realistic and practical

1. They're getting married very suddenly. They say they have *both feet on the ground* and that they have given it serious thought, but I have my doubts.
2. You're leaving school before you graduate? I don't think you know what you're doing. Are you sure you have *both feet on the ground*?

Synonym: *down-to-earth*

Antonym: *head in the clouds*

## BOTTOM LINE, THE

the net result (sentence 1), or the simple and irrefutable truth (sentence 2)

1. You've told me about the down payment, the closing costs, the interest rate, and the price of the house. What's *the bottom line*? How much money am I actually going to have to spend on this house?
2. You and I can argue around and around on this issue, but *the bottom line* is that our children will have to go to college if they want to get well-paid jobs in the future.

Synonyms: *long and short of it, nitty-gritty*

The expression is often used to describe a monetary figure (sentence 1), but it also describes the basic, (supposedly) undeniable truth of an argument (sentence 2). The expression probably originates from the accounting practice of adding together the profits and subtracting the costs to arrive at a final figure under the bottom line on a spreadsheet or in a ledger or account book.

## BOTTOM OF THE BARREL

the least able member of a group; the least desirable items from a collection

1. That's probably the worst idea I've ever heard! You've really reached *the bottom of the barrel*, haven't you?
2. I guess we can ask George to help. But in my opinion, we're scraping *the bottom of the barrel* if we have to turn to him.

Antonym: *cream of the crop*

This idiom is often used with the verbs "to reach" or "to scrape," as in the examples, and is used to express a negative opinion about a person or thing.



## BOTTOMS UP!

a call to drink; to empty one's glass

1. We had better finish our drinks because the bar is closing. *Bottoms up!*
2. Young Timmy did not want to drink his medicine, but *bottoms up!* his mother insisted as she pressed the glass into his hands.

The expression suggests the idea that the bottom of one's glass will be up when one drinks. It is informal.

## BOXED IN/BOX (SOMEONE) IN

restricted; to restrict someone

1. David feels *boxed in* because he is stuck in a dead-end job and he doesn't have any options.
2. Don't *box yourself in* by spending all your savings on the most expensive car and not having any money left in case of an emergency.

## BRAINSTORM

to generate many ideas quickly

1. When faced with a complicated problem, it is often useful to *brainstorm* several possible solutions first before deciding on which strategy you will apply.
2. Before we began writing, our teacher asked us to *brainstorm* topics for our compositions.

Brainstorming is often a formal step in problem solving. The goal is to generate potential solutions without immediately evaluating them. Evaluation is carried out as a subsequent step. The word "brainstorm" is a verb, but its *-ing* form, *brainstorming*, is often used as a noun (as in the first sentence in this paragraph).

## BREADWINNER

somebody that provides financially for his or her family

1. When Harold quit his job and went back to school, he and his wife needed to adjust to having one *breadwinner* instead of two.
2. When her family needed more money, Tara got a job after school to help out. She became a *breadwinner*.

## BREAK THE ICE

to get things started, particularly by means of a social introduction or conversation

1. It didn't take long for the guests at the party to *break the ice*. By the time dinner was served, almost everyone was chatting with someone they had just met.
2. I'm afraid we haven't met. Let me *break the ice* by introducing myself. My name is John Taylor.

The expression suggests the idea of breaking through an icy surface to clear a path for ships.

## BRING DOWN THE HOUSE

to be a great success

1. The comedian at the dinner show is wonderful. He *brings down the house* every night.
2. The music critic didn't like the new symphony being presented at the concert hall. In his newspaper review, he said it would never *bring down the house*.

The expression is almost exclusively used to describe theatrical or musical performances, but it could also be used for any event that would generate applause. It suggests that when an artistic performance is a great success, the audience applauds so noisily as to make the ceiling and walls of the theater collapse.

## BRING HOME THE BACON

to bring money into the household to support a family

1. It's romantic to marry someone you love, but when you set up your household, you're going to have bills to pay. You should think about marrying someone who will help *bring home the bacon*.
2. Leo became ill and couldn't work anymore, so his wife went back to work. Now she's the one who *brings home the bacon*.

## BRUSH-OFF, GET/GIVE (SOMEONE) THE

to be dismissed casually and almost cruelly

1. Sue accepted John's invitation to the dance, but when Wayne asked her to go, she *gave John the brush-off* and told him she didn't want to go with him.
2. The boss told me that he was busy right then and that I should come back later. I told him, "Don't *give me the brush-off*. I deserve an honest answer from you."

The expression suggests the idea of brushing a small piece of lint or dirt from one's clothing. It is usually used where one person is superior to (or thinks he is superior to) the other.

## BUG

to bother, annoy, or irritate mildly

1. I told you I would have that report done by the end of the day, so stop *bugging* me about it.
2. The children *bugged* their mother about going to the movies until she lost her temper.

Compare to: *rub (someone) the wrong way*; *set (one's) teeth on edge*; *get (someone's) dander up*; *get (someone's) goat*

Whereas *get someone's dander up* means to irritate in earnest, *bug* means to annoy harmlessly or perhaps humorously. The expression suggests a bug flying around one's head.

## BULL IN A CHINA SHOP

insensitive to delicate situations; to be so clumsy that one breaks things inadvertently

1. Tom was a bit of a *bull in a china shop* when he met his girlfriend's family, asking all the wrong kinds of questions about her relatives.
2. Larry can't take his son into the glassware store because he always manages to break things. He's like a *bull in a china shop*.

## BUM STEER, GIVE SOMEONE A

bad advice or instructions

1. My stockbroker really gave me a *bum steer*. I bought a stock he recommended and it did nothing but go down.
2. Kim stopped at a gas station for directions to city hall. The mechanic told her how to get there, but he gave her a *bum steer* and she got lost again.

## BURN (ONE'S) BRIDGES

to take a course of action that makes it impossible to go back

1. If you commit yourself to that course of action, you'll be *burning your bridges* and you won't be able to start over.
2. Anita decided she ought to leave herself the option of going back to school. She decided not to *burn all her bridges*.

## BURN RUBBER

to accelerate with tires so quickly from a stopped position that the rubber tires make a loud squealing noise and leave a black mark on the street; slang expression meaning to hurry

1. The traffic light turned green. The car tires squealed as the driver pushed the gas pedal to the floor and *burned rubber*.
2. We're going to have to *burn rubber* if we hope to get to the wedding on time.

This expression is also used as slang for "hurry."

## BURN THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS

to overwork oneself

1. Marie works all day and goes to school every evening, then she has to get up early in order to study. She's wearing herself out. She's *burning the candle at both ends*.
2. You really *burn the candle at both ends*. You've got to start taking it easy or you'll end up in the hospital.

The expression suggests that one is wasting one's resources or energy.

## BURN THE MIDNIGHT OIL

to stay up late at night studying or working

1. If they expect to pass the test tomorrow, they'll have to open their books and begin *burning the midnight oil*.
2. The boss expects to see the new plans tomorrow. The only way I'm going to be able to finish them in time is to *burn the midnight oil* tonight.

The expression suggests burning the oil in an oil lamp for light in order to work in the dark.

## BURNED OUT

lacking enthusiasm due to overexposure or too much of the same thing; completely used up; worn out

1. Scott just couldn't face another semester studying chemistry. He had taken so many chemistry classes that he was *burned out*.
2. Betty got *burned out* spending so much time volunteering at the hospital. She decided she needed a vacation.

The expression suggests a device like a light bulb that burns out (stops shining) when all of its energy is used up.

## BURNING QUESTION

a question that deserves or demands discussion

1. I don't think there's any doubt that he loves her, but will he marry her? That's the *burning question*.
2. It's not a matter of which college he should apply to, since he can get into both of them. The *burning question* is, what should he study once he gets there?

## BURY THE HATCHET

to end a dispute

1. This argument has gone on too long. Why don't we *bury the hatchet* once and for all?
2. I will always be sorry that my father and I fought before he died and I never got a chance to *bury the hatchet*.

Compare to: *clear the air*

The expression may originate from a Native American custom of burying a hatchet as a sign of agreeing to peace.

## BUTT IN

to interfere (sentence 1) or literally to push one's way in between other people (sentence 2)

1. This argument is between your sister and me, and it doesn't concern you. Don't *butt in*.
2. We've been waiting patiently in this long line, and that woman just *butted in* ahead of us. She should have gone to the end of the line to wait like the rest of us.

The expression suggests a ram butting with its horns.



### **BUTTER (SOMEONE) UP**

to flatter someone, usually excessively, in order to gain a favor

1. My husband brought me candy and sent flowers, and now he's telling me how good my cooking is. I think he wants something and he's trying to *butter me up* so that I'll agree.
2. If you want the professor to do you a favor, just ask her. *Don't butter her up.*

This idiom is a reference to the act of 'covering' someone in praise or flattery, like covering a slice of bread with butter.

### **BUY (SOMETHING) FOR A SONG**

to buy something very cheaply

1. Sue and Dennis found an antique painting in that shop, but the salesman didn't know its true value. It must be worth a small fortune, and they *bought it for a song*.
2. The man was desperate to get rid of his car, so I was able to *buy it for a song*.

The expression suggests that one can buy something by just singing a song.

### **BY HOOK OR BY CROOK**

by one way or another; by any means possible

1. Margaret was determined to lose 25 pounds before summer *by hook or by crook*.
2. Bruce would be such an asset to this company, but there aren't any positions open right now. *By hook or by crook*, we'll have to get him a job in this office.

The expression connotes that rules or convention may be broken in order to achieve the goal.

### **BY THE BOOK, GO**

operate according to the rules

1. The pilot might have carried out some preflight procedures more quickly, but because he was training a new pilot, he did everything *by the book* so the trainee would learn the procedures.
2. As a parent raising children, you can't always *go by the book* and follow the rules. Sometimes you have to use your intuition.

The expression probably originates from the idea that the procedure or accepted rules of an established game are set down in a book.

### **BY THE SEAT OF (ONE'S) PANTS, DO (SOMETHING)**

to accomplish something by luck and instinct rather than skill

1. At the last minute, the boss was taken ill and Kate had to give the sales presentation. She was not sure of the best way to proceed, but she used the notes that the boss had prepared and followed her instincts. She managed the presentation *by the seat of her pants*.
2. The children had never cooked a whole meal or used the washing machine before. When their mother left in an emergency, they kept things going at the house *by the seat of their pants*.

Synonyms: *wing it; play it by ear*

### **BY THE SKIN OF (ONE'S) TEETH**

by a very narrow margin

1. The thief leaped from one building to another to escape the police. He almost missed the second building, but he made it *by the skin of his teeth*.
2. Dan and Mark were swimming in the ocean and spotted a shark coming toward them. They swam to their boat and pulled themselves out of the water just in time. They made it out of the water *by the skin of their teeth*.

Synonym: *hair's breadth*

Compare to: *close shave*

The expression suggests that something is as narrow as the (nonexistent) skin on one's teeth.

### **BY WORD OF MOUTH**

the informal, verbal passing of information from one person to another

1. Walter heard about it from one of the company's employees even though it had not been advertised in the newspaper. He got the information *by word of mouth*.
2. Jane and Sarah will be very hurt if they aren't invited to your party. You won't be able to keep it a secret. They are sure to hear about it *by word of mouth*.